

**COUNTRY BRIEF** GROWTH AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES FOR WOMEN

# Mapping the policy landscape for women's economic empowerment in Rwanda

Rwanda aspires to be a middle-income country by 2035, as an economic trade and communications hub. The country's national development plans aim for a transition towards an economy based on knowledge and technology. This presents tremendous opportunities for women's and youth employment and entrepreneurship.

Despite gender equality gains, including in political participation, women in Rwanda remain disadvantaged by their limited access to assets and control of productive resources and services, such as credit, technology, information, and farm inputs. They also carry out the bulk of unpaid care work (UCW).

As family providers and caregivers, women and girls have been among the most vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Their access to life-saving services are disrupted by prevention and response policies, and they are economically at risk from their concentration in heavily affected sectors, such as tourism and hospitality.

*What are the policy levers advancing women's economic empowerment (WEE) in Rwanda, and what role can research play?*

This brief captures the main findings of a scoping paper that highlights policies, plans, and initiatives related to WEE in Rwanda. Based on a rapid review of existing academic, policy and programming literature, supplemented by stakeholder interviews and focus group discussion, the paper documents in-country knowledge, innovations, and potential solutions to empower women, with particular focus on three priority themes – UCW, gender segregation in the labour market, and women's collective action.

## Entry points for a WEE agenda:



Address gaps in gender-disaggregated data to strengthen evidence for decision-making



Ensure WEE issues are addressed in Rwanda's COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan



Build capacity for computing the value of unpaid care work



Strengthen implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of newly revised policies and strategies relevant to WEE.



## Women's status in Rwanda

Rwanda has emerged as a leader in advancing women's political participation. In 2017, it ranked fourth globally and first in Africa on the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index. Despite these gains, there remain important gender gaps. Women make up more than half the Rwandan population but continue to lag behind in terms of employment opportunities: just over 45% participate in the labour market compared to 63% of men.

Moreover, women are less involved than men in entrepreneurship due to their lack of specific skills and capacities: only 45% of urban businesses are female-owned, while in rural areas, men own 83.4% of enterprises. Only 24% of women have accounts in commercial banking systems, and only 38% of women can access credit using land as collateral. This limited access to finance hinders women's ability to be economically empowered.

Despite land law reforms that accorded women and men equal property rights, women still have limited control over productive resources and have limited bargaining power within the household. And while the country's agriculture strategy is essential to reducing poverty and driving growth, women remain concentrated in unpaid domestic responsibilities. The latest Labour Force Survey (2018) shows that women spend an average of 25.3 hours per week on UCW compared to 13.5 hours for their male counterparts.

Nearly one-quarter of women (23%) are illiterate compared to 18% of men. Relative gender parity has been achieved

in primary and secondary thanks to various initiatives promoting girls' education. But girls and women lag behind in higher and technical education. Their lower rates of enrollment limit women's competitiveness in science-related employment opportunities.

## Key policies and plans relevant to WEE

Rwanda has made great efforts to promote economic inclusiveness, with a special focus on women and youth. Gender equality is a cross-cutting issue in national development frameworks such as Vision 2020, the seven-year National Strategy for Transformation, and sector strategic plans. Yet, while many existing policies cover gender equality and women's empowerment, important gaps remain.

### Unpaid care work

There is no specific policy in Rwanda that deals with UCW, though several policies address the UCW burden indirectly. The National Early Child Development policy addresses childcare constraints related to the development of children aged three to six years. One of the policy's principles is gender equality, with early child development seen as a responsibility to be shared between men and women. But the policy does not address the needs of children under the age of three, those with special needs, and vulnerable children, leaving many parents alone in facing the childcare burden. There are also not enough childcare centres to meet the needs of eligible families.

## Key national policies and plans concerning women:

- National Gender Policy (2010, revised 2020)
- National Early Childhood Development Policy (2011, revised 2016)
- The National Employment Policy (2007, revised 2019)
- Infrastructure Gender Mainstreaming Strategy (2017- 2022)
- National Land Policy (2004, under revision)
- National Policy on Cooperatives in Rwanda (2018)

The National Gender Policy, which is currently under revision, aims to accelerate WEE with an objective of ensuring equal access to and control of productive resources and economic opportunities for women and men, boys and girls. One of the new policy issues to be solved is addressing women's heavy involvement in domestic activities, including UCW and the limited use of alternative sources of energy for cooking.

Among the programs addressing UCW are the UN Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JPRWEE) and ActionAid Rwanda's POWER program. JPRWEE addresses the UCW burden by promoting energy-saving technologies such as water harvesting tanks, green houses, compost management, and small-scale irrigation. The joint program, which was evaluated in 2019, has greatly contributed to UCW reduction and redistribution through its gender action learning system, engagement of men, and promotion of energy-saving technologies. Through POWER, ActionAid has established 12 ECD centres in five districts for children aged three to six years old, allowing mothers to engage in more productive work, while also supporting women with time-saving interventions. Findings from an evaluation conducted in May 2020 are expected to provide valuable lessons.

### Gender segregation in labour markets

Labour markets are also addressed through the National Employment Policy and the related National Employment Program, which aim at creating sufficient and productive jobs, increasing skills, and creating positive work-related attitudes with a special focus on youth and women.

Rwandan labour law, amended in 2018, prohibits discrimination based on gender. It also grants six weeks of maternity leave for every woman employed in the public or private sector, and allocates coverage of one

hour per day for breastfeeding for a period of one year and one extra month in the case of complicated births. However, these provisions only benefit women in formal employment, leaving out the majority who work in the informal sector.

The Employment Gender Mainstreaming Strategy was developed to promote employment strategies aimed at bridging gender gaps. Women's participation is also promoted through other employment promotion policies and strategies, including the National Skills Development and Employment Promotion Strategy and the National Mobility Policy.

The Gender Equality Seal initiative, championed by the UNDP and the Gender Monitoring Office, seeks to eliminate gender inequalities in the workplace while improving the lives of all employees and their families. It emphasizes gender mainstreaming by—among other measures—eliminating gender-based pay gaps, increasing women's roles in decision-making, and enhancing women's access to non-traditional jobs. There is, as of yet, no evidence on the effectiveness of this new initiative.

### Collective action

Cooperatives are an important means of strengthening women's collective action and provide a way for women to develop their business skills and potential. The National Cooperative Policy guides the legalization and operation of cooperatives in Rwanda. It emphasizes inclusive cooperative membership to extend benefits such as mutual support, joint and collective investment, and access to loans at lower interest rates to women, youth, and people with disabilities.

Some of the initiatives and mechanisms for collective action aimed at economically empowering women in Rwanda include: village savings and loan associations; savings and credit organizations; microfinance institutions; the Ubudehe scheme, which provides access to collateral-free credit; and the Cross Border Trade strategy which targets traders who are largely women working through cooperatives.

Despite the number of policies and interventions that address WEE at least indirectly, the authors note their effectiveness is constrained by:

- the absence of WEE-specific policies or legal frameworks
- the lack of an evidence base to inform policy-making
- a lack of gender-sensitive indicators to track policy and program outcomes
- a failure to integrate gender equality and WEE as cross-cutting issues
- a limited capacity for gender analysis
- the sparse coverage and scattered nature of programs and initiatives, and
- gaps in financing for gender-transformative interventions.



## Research entry points

Overall, there is limited existing research on WEE in Rwanda, and gaps in gender-disaggregated data at sectoral and district levels leave a lack of evidence for decision-making. Addressing these gaps can enhance policy effectiveness and improve program implementation.

A number of newly revised policies and plans, and those pending evaluation, would benefit from action research with key stakeholders.

- The COVID-19 Economic Recovery Plan announced in April 2020 is short on gender analysis and has no clear measurement plan to track its effectiveness for women. There may be an opportunity to engage and provide evidence for the plan's eventual review to ensure WEE issues are addressed in implementation.
- The draft National Gender Policy (pending cabinet approval) addresses both WEE and unpaid care work. The Policy has an implementation plan but lacks an adequate monitoring and evaluation (M&E) framework. Training will also be needed to build capacity in computing the value of UCW.
- The National Employment Policy has gaps to be addressed, including addressing negative cultural norms and practices and the inadequate skill levels among vulnerable women to help them compete in labour markets.
- The revised National Early Child Development Policy identifies WEE barriers and actions to address

them, along with their cost implications. There is an opportunity to contribute to addressing these barriers, by strengthening implementation and M&E of the revised policy.

- The updated Social Protection Policy and related Strategic Plan have useful data and strategies to ensure delivery of interventions, as well as an M&E framework. Analysis of this data would provide evidence to inform future WEE interventions in the social protection sector.

## Recommendations for research uptake

Across all thematic areas, it will be important to engage stakeholders — including government ministries, agencies and departments; international partners; researchers; and private sector and civil society organizations — who play an important role in designing and implementing WEE programs. While it is important to publish studies, surveys, and reviews regularly to provide up-to-date information and clear evidence, there is a need for clear feedback loops with in-country stakeholders, program designers, and implementers to advance progress on specific WEE themes.

In addition to sharing research evidence, engagement with key stakeholders can help to address barriers that have undermined effective policy implementation, including resource mobilization and coordination challenges and a lack of inclusive policy development.

*The Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) East Africa initiative seeks to spur transformative change to advance gender equality in the world of work. It is funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, and Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Building on the success of the multi-funder GrOW program, GrOW East Africa aims to enhance gender equality and the economic empowerment of marginalized women in five countries of focus: Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Uganda. It will foster new in-country knowledge, innovations, and solutions to inform policies and programs addressing unpaid care work, sex segregation in labour markets, and women's employment. Activities will be spearheaded in partnership with in-country practitioners, governments, and researchers.*

*Scoping papers were commissioned for each of these countries to form a baseline that will allow for monitoring progress in implementing GrOW East Africa. The paper "Policy mapping: Women's economic empowerment in Rwanda," which this brief draws from, was prepared by Judith K. Katararwa.*

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